

Phenomenological analysis on first-generation college students



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Introduction

In the 2015-2016 academic year, first-generation students made up 24% of the undergraduate population; 18% of these students identified as Black/African American, and 25% identified as Hispanic/Latinx. Compared to children of parents with a college degree, 48% of first-generation students were set to graduate on time after three years. Compared to non-first generation students who had a drop-out rate of 14%, one-third of first generation students dropped out after three years. Only 5% of first-generation students enrolled in a doctoral program within four years of receiving that bachelor's degree.

First-generation college students experience multiple and multi-layered barriers in pursuing higher education that are unique to this population. To date, there is limited research that has explored this population's pursuit of higher education outside of quantitative research methodologies. Past studies found that first-generation college students experience intense family pressure, financial and social barriers, and a lack of support compared to their non-first-generation peers. Previous research also found that racial minoritized groups comprise a significant portion of first-generation students, which may require using qualitative research methodologies. It is important to understand the experience of higher education through first-person perspectives, as information will help colleges and universities provide better support needed for academic success.

The Phenomenological Approach:

Phenomenology is based on the psychodynamic perspective and is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the lived experiences of participants. The current study explored the experiences of first-generation college students using Heidegger's (1927) phenomenological approach. Heidegger proposed that a key principle in phenomenological study is knowing that people's lived experiences are meaningful, and that the state of everyday human experience gives insight into the true meaning of human existence. Heidegger was influenced by the founder of phenomenological researcher, Edmund Husserl. Husserl (1920) defined phenomenology as the study of consciousness, and proposed that phenomenological study involved three steps: (1) taking a transcendental attitude by understanding that human consciousness is free from any type of expectation, (2) understanding that people bring consciousness that provides a moment a phenomenon can be explored, and (3) describing the core of the experiences discovered. Heidegger believed in these principles but rejected the notion that the subject and phenomenon being studied are always one and the same.

Method

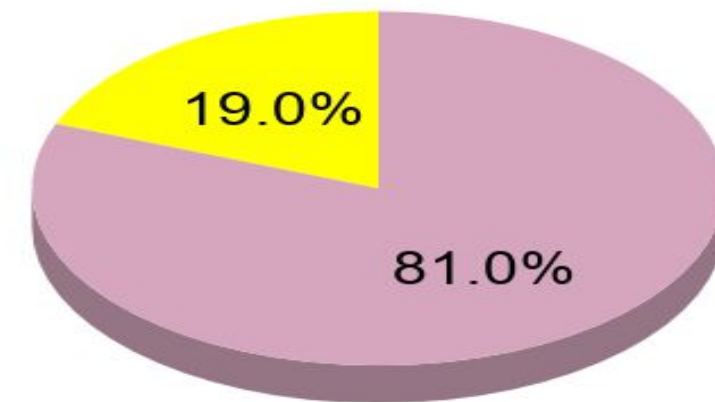
Undergraduate students ($N = 21$) who identified as first-generation college students (e.g., college students whose parents did not complete a four-year degree) volunteered to participate in the study. Recruitment of participants was obtained in psychology classes after gaining permission from instructors. Students who met the criteria to participate were provided a date and time for the interview. As part of the phenomenological methodology, each researcher bracketed--through journaling--any preconceived assumptions regarding the phenomenon studied, which helped to separate symbolic meanings and researcher biases. After reviewing the informed consent process and filling out a brief demographics questionnaire that asks about age, sex, and race, all participants were asked one question:

“What is your experience like as a first-generation college student?”

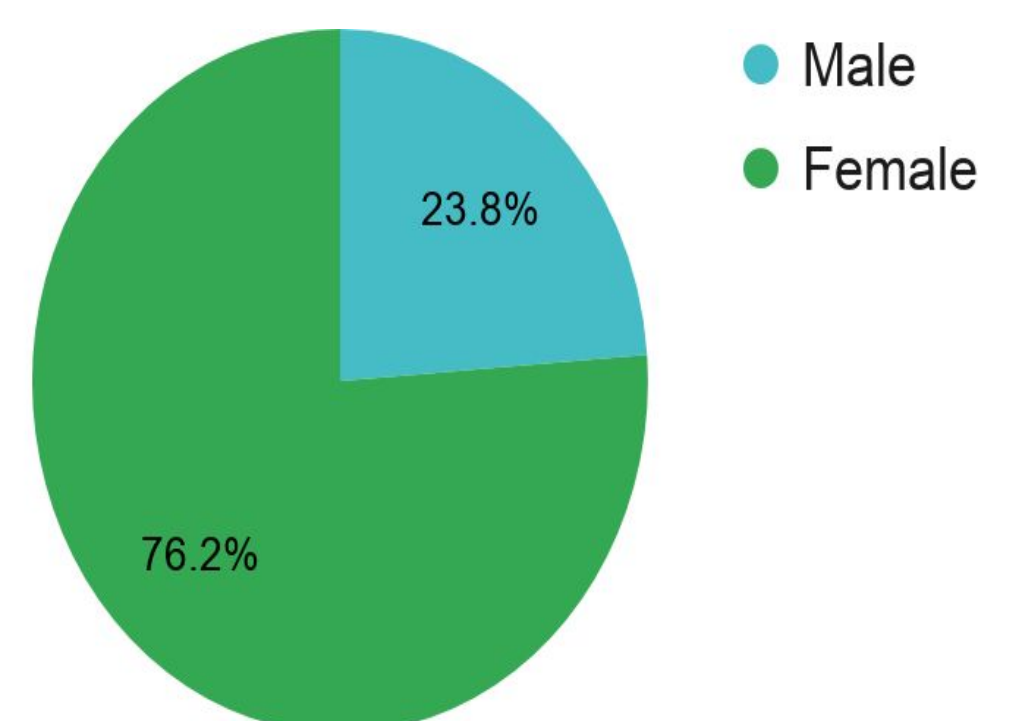
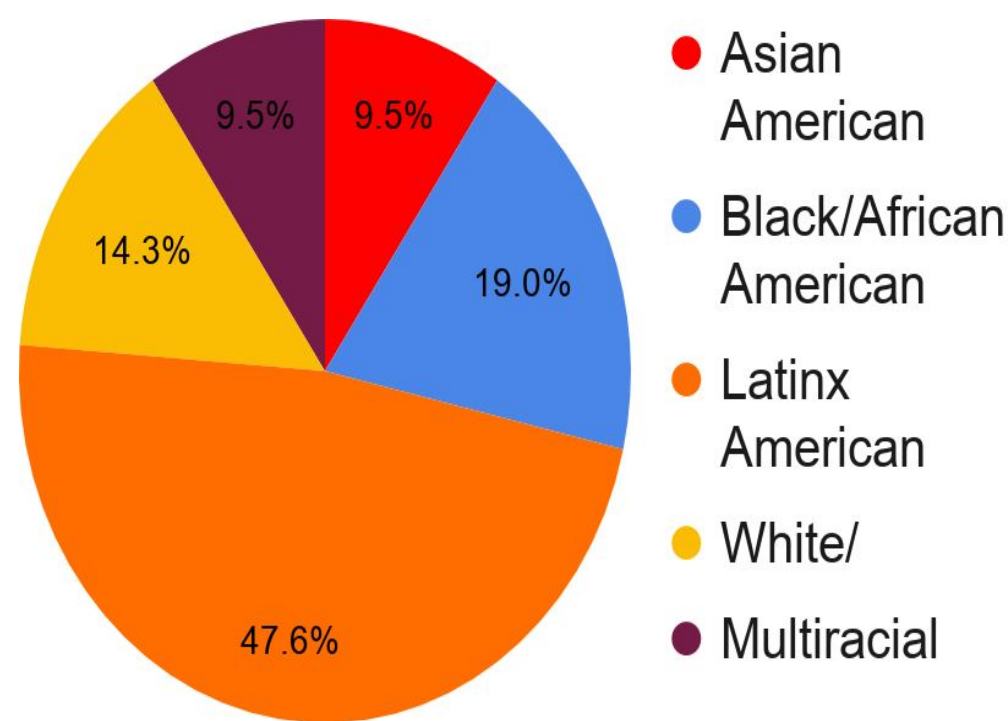
Following data collection, interviews were transcribed, cleaned of unnecessary word fillers (e.g., umms, redundancy), and qualitatively coded. Meaning units were placed into broad categories, through which broad themes were extracted based on commonalities of the categories. Transcription was aided through the use of an application and later double-checked through human means. Audio recordings were stored in a locked cabinet that could only be accessed by the primary researcher and were deleted after transcription. To minimize bias and increase accountability, the researchers checked in with each other continually and shared their perspectives when analyzing and categorizing the data.

Phenomenological Results

Participant Ages



N=21
Age, $M = 24.29$, $SD = 9.50$
17 participants were 19-23 years old
4 participants were 30-52 years old



Participant	Quotes	Meaning Units	Categories	Themes
FS1i	It's been just difficult to transition because I studied my whole life everything in (language of origin) and now I study everything in English.	Transitioning from studying in their native language to learning everything in English has been difficult.	Challenges in Language	Challenges
JS6p	But like I had a lot of people bring me down in the process of doing it.	She had a lot of people discourage her during the process of applying for college.	Lack of Support	Support

Themes	Support	Duties & Responsibilities	Goals	Motivation	Challenges
Categories*	-Influence of Family -Receiving Financial Support -Lack of Support	-Providing guidance to others -Financial responsibilities -Time Management	-Goals while in college -Goals post high school -Goals post college	-Lack of motivation -What drives them in college	-Experiences with discrimination -Having to do things on their own -Challenges with language
Themes	Resilience	Education Background	Guilt	College Experience	Life Experiences
Categories*	-Independence -Taking Initiative in Learning	-The Level of Education their Parents Received -High School Experience	-Feeling Guilty for Being Able To Go To College	-Impression of College -Doubts about their Success -How College has Changed Them	-Family History -Experiences with Grief

*Examples of some of the categories. Not every category is included.

Discussion

Preliminary results found 10 themes: Support, Duties & Responsibilities, Goals, Motivation, Challenges, Resilience, Education Background, Guilt, College Experience, and Life Experiences. Our results show that first-generation college students require financial support, parental knowledge of the higher education process, mentorship, mental health interventions, and guidance navigating their major. Interventions to decrease the hardships documented through our study may include panels on Financial Aid, university-funded English lessons, transparency on potential challenges in choosing a major, and promoting closer relationships with academic advisors or other mentors. Future research could include first-generation students from other ethnic groups, e.g., Indigenous/Indian Americans, or expand on phenomenological analysis to directly ask this population what would help them become more successful in college.